John Lane's Daughter

By Margaret E. Sangster.

Too far from home to go back very quickly, Cynthia Lane spent her Christmas holidays with her Aunt Sophy in Chicago. This was what broadened her horizon. When she returned to Elmore Hall after that visit, the girls observed in the very first week, that the old Cynthia had disappeared and a new one had come in her place. The new one puzzled them. They liked her predecessor better.

Cynthia Lane, fresh from a little town in Southern Ohio, had been perfectly satisfied to wear a red golf cape and felt toque with a black feather. Although many of her classmates had a larger and finer wardrobe than hers, she had not envied them or coveted their magnificence. With a light heart she had packed her little trunk, after Aunt Sophy's invitation came, and had gaily gone to the great city, feeling that she was prepared for every conceivable occasion.

Her mother's letter, which she found in the postoffice on her way to the train, said, "Cynthia, dear, don't wear your best things every day at Aunt Sophia's. Remember that your brown cashmere must last for Sunday until spring. Your second-best frock will do very well unless they have company. Bear in mind, my child, that you are a little country girl, and a school girl at that, and that nobody will expect you to compete with rich city cousins."

Wise advice! But Cynthia hardly took in its meaning. Her thoughts went dancing ahead, and she hummed a tune under her breath as the miles flew under the train.

Her first disillusion and dissatisfaction came the day after her arrival, when she overheard her cousin Gertrude, in the next room, say in a low voice, perfectly audible through the thin partition wall:

"The child has not a single thing fit to wear. Mother, we'll have to lend her Edith's clothes while she stays."

"Hush, Gertrude," Aunt Sophy answered. "I would not offer her such a thing for the world. My sister would never forgive me. Cynthia is all right for her home and for college. She's only to be here over New Year's day. What does it matter how she is dressed?"

Cynthia had not meant to listen, and flushing hotly from head to foot, she wished New Year's day well past and herself back at Elmore. Her eyes were opened. She perceived that she was not in the least like the girls who fluttered into her aunt's house, and poised on the wing to chat with Gertrude and Edith, girls elaborately dressed. She did not dream that the eyes of most people rested approvingly on her bright face and never noted anything wrong about her clothing. Gertrude had made her uncomfortable.

She went with her relatives on shopping expeditions. The great department stores were a revalation to her of the glory of this world. Silks, laces, jewels, silver, soft wools, dainty linens—what in all that bewildering variety was there wanting? Desire awakened in her soul, but she stifled it and held up her head proudly. She was determined not to let her cousins suspect that she had an ungratified wish, and with an instinctive pride she repressed any show of surprise at the city's marvels. Cynthia refused to be impressed by the crowds and the wonders.

Edith Harper was to "come out" in January, and her mother was much occupied in preparing her for the functions in which a debutante takes part. A white evening dress especially enchanted Cynthia, who gazed at the folds of mousseline-de-soi, the delicate embroidery, the graceful demitrain. Oh, to have something like this!

"Cynthia," said Edith, suddenly, "You are coming again for Easter, aren't you? Why don't you let madame make you a pretty gown for my birthday party? It would be a real economy, for you will want a dress later on to wear at commencement."

"I shall not be graduated this summer, Edith. I'm only a freshman. I've three years more before I'll need splendors. And then I'll be rigged out in cap and gown to receive my diploma. We don't dress at Ponkaloo as you do here."

"What mademoiselle needs," said the French woman, looking kindly at the dark eyed girl with the country roses abloom in her cheeks, "is not such a frock as this, Miss Edith, but something different—a high dress with tucked yoke, and sleeve bouffant, and a deep flounce under clusters of tiny puffs; not a train, but long to the ground all around. I could make her such a gown at a small price—not more than seventy-five dollars."

"It's the chance of your lifetime, Cynthia," said Edith, solemnly. "Better give madame the order. She's awfully good to take such an interest, in her busy season, too. I assure you it would be a bargain; a French gown, Cynthia."

"I would have to write to Mother," said Cynthia.

"Well, I'll tell you what to do. You let madame take your measure. Then you may have a lining fitted. I am just your height, and the skirt can be tried on me. The dress can be made as well as not while you are at college, without you having more than the first fitting. As soon as you hear from your mother you can write to madame, and she'll do all the rest. You haven't an idea how pretty you'll look, Cynthia, in a proper gown."

Cynthia drew herself up. At the back of her mind there was a strong protest of dissent, but desire had her by the throat, and she could not shake off the tightening grip.

"I'll give the order now," she said, decidedly. "Mother will want me to be pleased, and there is no need to wait."

Her resolve taken, a sense of elation possessed her. She felt as if she were indeed Edith's cousin as she stood in the dressmaker's room, where gowns costing hundreds of dollars and wraps of Parisian elegance and fabulous prices were strewn carelessly about, or hung in carved cabinets behind glass doors.

She was for the moment not little Cynthia Lane, only daughter of John Lane, farmer, of Ponkaloo, and also the best writer of composition in her class at Elmore Hall, but a fairy princess, a girl who had dared and ventured. Although how in the wide world she was going to pay seventy-five dollars for a gown she did not in the least know.

Cynthia had been brought up in an atmosphere of rectitude and economy. It had been a great strain on the home resources to send her to college. There had been planning and saving and scrimping to do it. Her father and mother would not touch the sum laid aside for a rainy day. They had managed to meet the expenses for the first year, and hoped that their bright little girl would win a scholarship to make easier the second. Cynthia knew this. Nevertheless, she trod on air after she had ordered the gown, and when Edith hugged her and Gertrude congratulated, she blushed and laughed lightheartedly. Her aunt was a trifle doubtful about the whole transaction.

"Shouldn't you have consulted your mother, dear? Madame has to be paid 'C. O. D.' And city prices are high compared with those at Ponkaloo."

"Oh, that will be all right!" replied Cynthia. "Don't say a word about it, Aunty, when you write. I want to surprise Mamma."

The holidays over. Cynthia went back to college. Then the girls thought her changed. She had plenty to do, fortunately.

Among other affairs, there was the annual contest for the Llewellyn prize. This was a prize of the hundred dollars in gold, awarded to the student whose all-round scholarship was the best in her year, and who in addition wrote the most satisfactory thesis on colonial history.

"I intend to carry off that prize," said Cynthia to herself. "Then I can pay madame and have twenty-five dollars over. How silly I would have been not to order that gown."

"How silly you are to spend all that money on a gown you can so seldom wear!" retorted common sense. "And you haven't won the prize yet!" Cynthia's room-mate found her silent and absorbed.

Plump into the middle of her cogitations came a note from Madame's establishment, announcing that the gown was nearly finished, and would be shipped to her in two days.

Cynthia's little purse contained precisely three dollars and forty-four cents, and there was no more money coming to her for a month.

What to do she did not know, but necessity is the spur of action. She sat down and sent a special delivery letter to Great-Aunt Millicent, the only person in the family connection who was possessed of great wealth. Cynthia set forth in eloquent terms her immediate and pressing need of seventy- five dollars, which she promised to return, if Great-Aunt Millicent would consent to loan the sum, in three months from its receipt. Tears blinded her as she wrote. She felt perfectly desperate, and when the letter was fairly despatched, she was absent-minded and wretched till the reply came.

She opened it, half-trembling. There was a brief letter in the stiff and painstaking hand of an elderly lady. Two enclosures accompanied the letter. One was a check for seventy-five dollars. The other a promissory note for the amount, made out in due form for value received.

"I am happy to accommodate you, Niece Cynthia," wrote the old lady. "I shall expect you to sign this note, return it to me, and refund the money as pledged at the expiration of ninety days. At first, as I dislike lending money, I was inclined to refuse your application. But I think I can trust John Lane's daughter, so here it is, and make a good use of it, I beg. Money does not grow on bushes, child."

Cynthia paid the dressmaker's bill. The dress was beautiful, a triumph of taste and skill. But with a revulsion of feeling Cynthia folded it in its box, and covered it with soft tissue-paper. She was glad that her room-mate was at a reception when the parcel arrived.

Into the fartherest corner of the top shelf in the closet she thrust the box; then she sat down and wrote in a fury of hope and fear on the thesis that meant so much more to her now than ever thesis had meant before. She must win at all odds.

But everything blocked the way. An inopportune attack of grippe laid her aside for a fortnight, and when she recovered it was to face an accumulation of work that has to be made up. She lost instead of gaining ground with the profsssors, who began to complain that she was dreaming and spent time in wool-gathering, when she should have been alert.

The dean, in a frank conversation, said that she was not doing herself justice, because she had overworked, and the Latin tutor detained her after class one day to ask if she did not require some special assistance. Cynthia gasped. She, who had aspired to coaching backward students, to be placed with the backward ones herself.

However, she toiled valiantly at her thesis. Although her sentences were leaden and her pen dragged, she kept stubbornly on, and at the proper time handed in her manuscript.

Then followed a weary month of waiting for the verdict. Not once in all this time did Cynthia so much as glance at the white gown, which had assumed in her eyes the form of a hateful penitential robe. One wordless prayer was in her heart by night and by day, that she might receive the prize and be able to repay her great-aunt.

She checked off the dates on her calendar. The days were most contradictory, slow in one aspect and swift in another. Now and then her modest little allowance came from home, from the father who trusted her, and it smote her heart as she received it.

At last, one morning, the names of the prize-winners were posted on the bulletin-board in chapel.

Cynthia Lane was not among them; she stood far below the necessary mark, and was nowhere near the top of the competition. Another girl had won the money prize. Cynthia had honorable mention and a scholarship.

The dean was sitting in her private parlor that evening when, after a slight tap for admittance, Cynthia Lane entered, and threw herself down